

BORN FROM HOPE: BUILT FOR STORIES

By Jill Cox-Cordova

A literary journal offers BIPOC writers space to create, reflect, and explore

Laura Pegram—author, educator, painter, and jazz vocalist—first had the vision to launch *Kweli Journal* 15 years ago. Now Pegram talks to *LJ* about the publication's moving origin story, its new commemorative anthology *Sing the Truth*, and plans for its future.

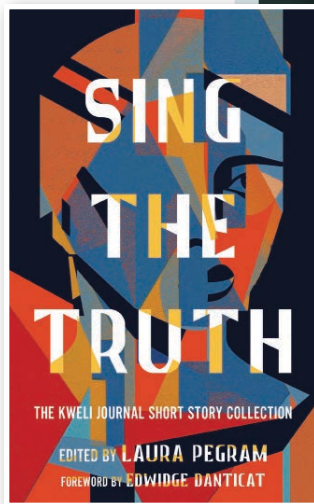
Q What led to your starting a short story—formatted publication?

My mother was a self-taught visual artist and a jazz enthusiast and a reader, so the arts have always been my oxygen. I volunteered as a teaching artist at the Frederick Douglass Community Arts Center (FDCAC) for many years. I designed the Art of the Short Story workshop and led multisession writing workshops on weeknights and weekends. I loved the short form, and the stories of Edwidge Danticat, Louise Erdrich, Edward P. Jones, and Yiyun Li were regulars on our workshop reading lists.

However, everything changed when I ended up in the hospital for two months and came home to my fifth-floor walk-up in a wheelchair. I was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disorder after college. My prognosis was uncertain. The only time I left my apartment was when the Windsor Ambulette service carried me to and from NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital for appointments with my doctors. At home, I had a rotating shift of home care attendants and in-home physical therapists who came in and out during the day. But I missed my former life, and my writing students at FDCAC most of all.

I started *Kweli Journal* because I needed a distraction from the head pain. I needed something beautiful to hold onto, something beyond all things medical and all of the swirling uncertainty. When I looked at a book in those early days of my recovery, I couldn't understand what was on the page, and that terrified me. So

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LAURA PEGRAM, founder of *Kweli Journal*, marks 15 years of creating space for stories, a celebratory and reflective selection of which are gathered in the recently published *Sing the Truth: The Kweli Journal Short Story Collection* (Authors Equity), edited by Pegram, with a foreword by Edwidge Danticat.

I didn't open a book for months. But I had faith that my brain would heal and I would one day be able to read again and maybe even walk again. The dream of *Kweli* was the light I so desperately needed. *Kweli Journal* was born, feet first, two years later.

Q What was the selection process for choosing the anthology's 14 stories from 15 years' worth of content?

It was really difficult to choose the pieces within this anthology, drawn as they were from many years of literary contributions across the country and the world. Going back over the work we had published was a journey unto itself; every couple of days, I would circle back to the team working on what we would include and submit two or three more favorites. We had to whittle down from what we kept calling a "final" list to the 14 stories here. I was looking for deeply layered works of art with complicated characters that provided a new perspective or a new way of seeing. I was looking for writing that was aware of its music. Most of all, I was looking for pieces that surprised me. Good storytellers know how to surprise. I don't think predictability is in their literary DNA.

Q What do you want librarians to consider when purchasing and placing this anthology on the shelf and in readers' hands?

In anthologies, there's something for everyone. There are different voices and experiences to connect with. In *Sing the Truth*, a reader can experience lives and histories that are not usually centered on the page, from Molly and Joh—newlyweds who were "less husband and wife than trembling children"—living on a Black-owned farm in Virginia in 1939, to Hiba, a Palestinian girl "coming off her own humiliation" while living with her grandparents Sits and Seed in present-day Baltimore. Readers can move from 10-second sound bites on Jamaica and Mexico and Cuba to a deeper understanding of community, during peacetime or wartime, whether the conflicts occur within a country or within a fractured family.

I would like librarians to consider that the short stories in *Sing* are beautiful and powerful works of art that can open the reader to new perspectives and a new way of seeing communities which are largely overlooked. I would like them to place this book in the hands of every reader who is curious and questioning and searching for hope in the face of incalculable loss. *Sing* is diverse in content, as well as the many ways to tell a story and be in the world. I feel that this is something librarians would want to know more about.

Q In 15 years, Kweli has become much more than a journal. Was that part of your original dream for it? What has surprised you the most, and what are you looking forward to?

"Kweli" means truth in Swahili. Since 2009, our mission has been to seek out the works of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and Arab writers that "sing the truth."

Our original dreamscape included a biannual journal,

online workshops open to writers around the globe, and a reading series for new and established artists. The Kweli dreamscape expanded as we became more fully aware of the disparate needs of our community. Each year, we would add a new initiative. Today we offer a quarterly online journal, NYC-based and webinar workshops, yearlong fellowships, public readings, individualized editing, an annual writers' conference and international festival, and a free craft series called "The Third Eye" on Instagram Live.

At Kweli, we make an investment in the artistic and professional growth of emerging authors, nationally and internationally, and seek to address the underrepresentation of writers identifying as women. We [recently] learned that

Ebonya Lia, one of our 2023 Kweli Writing Fellows, will be publishing her debut novel, [*I Can Feel It All Over*], with Amistad in spring 2027.

I am surprised by the number of artists this small nonprofit has mentored over the past 15 years, especially in light of our skeleton crew. We currently have one full-time staff member who donates her time, two to three part-time staff members who work from eight to 15 hours a week, and a rotating circle of volunteers (from high school students to Kweli contributors and fellows). I look forward to a sustainable future, with an expanding circle of full-time support staff and contributors who continue to "lift as they climb" as core members of the *Kweli Journal* faculty.

Q How will you use the proceeds from sales of *Sing the Truth* to further Kweli

Journal's mission of supporting and nurturing writers of color and building community?

Since our humble beginnings, Kweli has grown into a multifaceted community organization with nine programs that offer writing, mentorship, and educational opportunities for underrepresented writers, including the Kweli International Literary Festival, Kweli Color of Children's Literature Conference, our fellowship program, our reading and conversation series, Kweli's monthly online writing workshops, and more. We plan to use the proceeds from the sale of *Sing the Truth* to support our innovative programming, by adding live music and dance and visual art to interpret the author's words on the page.

Spaces like Kweli, nonprofits related to the arts and humanities and that work for inclusivity, are under threat right now. Grants are being lost, funding is being cut, there are a lot of unknowns and a lot of precariousness. The proceeds from *Sing* will go towards filling in those lacks and gaps. The more copies sold, the more Kweli can continue its mission of craft and creativity and love and community. We always pull together and support each other in solidarity. We all need each other even more right now. ■



IMAGE AND STORY The cover art for *Kweli Journal's* May 2025 issue is *Love Is in the Hair* by Chase Williamson, a visual artist and MFA candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.